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Human rights education in Iranian secondary education: gaps in the curriculum

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Abstract

This study investigates traces of human rights education in Iran, one of the basic internationally controversial issues in education in general and in Iranian curriculum development in particular. The study basically focused on two areas: a) concepts and components in human rights education and b) the amount of attention possibly paid to these concepts and components in Iranian Secondary Education. Three basic domains of knowledge, skills, and attitudes in relation to human rights education in Iran were considered and the amount of attention possibly paid to these was investigated in the design, administration, and evaluation of curricula for Iranian secondary education. To do this, the viewpoints of teachers, administrators, and experts were collected in a descriptive survey attempt. A researcher-made questionnaire with the Cronbach alpha reliability of 0.88 was used for data collection from 200 teachers, 27 administrators, and 15 experts. To analyze the data, descriptive and inferential statistics were used. The results suggested that the administrators, the teachers and the curriculum planners all agreed with teaching the concepts of human rights expressed in the domains of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Curriculum planners admitted that the amount of attention paid to the concepts and components of human rights was not satisfactory. There was no significant difference between the students, teachers and experts concerning the education of peace. Suggestions and implication for authorities in Iran are discussed in the light of the participants' voices.

© 2010 Elsevier Ltd. Open access under [CC BY-NC-ND license](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).**Keywords:** Human rights, Human rights education, Curriculum, Secondary education

1. Introduction and background

Human rights education is a movement for the promotion of awareness about the rights declared by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the procedures that exist for addressing violations of these rights (Reardon, 1995; Tibbitts, 1996, Amnesty International, 2005; Batelaan and Coomans, 1999, Tibbitts 2008,). The United Nations (UN) formally recognized the right of citizens to be informed about their rights contained in the documents, that is the right to human rights education (UNGA, 2005). International policymakers, human rights bodies, and national human rights agencies have addressed human rights education, arguing that the treatment of human rights themes should be present in schooling (Pearse, 1987). Teaching the skills of social life, offering knowledge and forming behaviours which develop human rights are among the objectives of the human rights education. During the conference of the united nations organization which was held in Vienna in 1933, human rights education was declared as necessary for the expansion of mutual understanding, patience and international peace. Given the importance of human rights education, the United Nations Organization duly stressed human rights education in order to increase knowledge about human rights and to boost the perception and respect human rights. Like any

other educational issue, human rights education can also be decomposed for the purpose of analysis to components and parts, an awareness of which will increase the effectiveness of human rights education especially in developing countries. The first consequence of the better understanding of human rights and their inclusion in the curriculum may be a reconsideration of the school curriculum at different levels of education (Shekarey, & Rahimi 2006). This study attempts to investigate human rights education in the three components of knowledge, skills and attitudes with an intention to sensitize curriculum designers to such issues in relation to human rights.

The main objectives were to survey the amount of attentions paid to human rights education in the Iranian secondary education curriculum and to offer suggestions for the improvement of the secondary education curriculum in terms of human rights education. The secondary purposes were to differentiate the knowledge, skill and attitude concepts of human rights education, and to survey references to human rights in the Iranian secondary school curriculum, in its implementation, and in its evaluation.

It is difficult to give a comprehensive and unanimous definition of human rights, because there are different theories and schools describing rights, human beings, the origins of rights, governments and so on. Perhaps the following descriptions can cover what comes in many existing definitions. Human rights mean determinate privileges for the human race because of his being human. Human rights refer to rights which all members of the society, man or woman, boy or girl, the young or old must enjoy. In the modern world, Human rights are the embodiment of fundamental standards without which people cannot maintain their humanity. Human rights are the kind of rights which people must be enjoyed because of one's human identity not because of one's religion, race, language, or nationality.

Amnesty International defines human right education as a plan to provide the knowledge and the understanding of human rights in an attempt to introduce human rights values in the curriculums and in both formal and informal education (Shekarey, Zare-ee, Rahimi, and Behravy 2009). It can also be said that human rights education is a combination of trainings for the following purposes: Developing an awareness of human rights values, improving and observing human rights through education, familiarizing people with ways to fight against human rights violation, and promoting the enforcement of human rights

1.1. Human rights education objectives

Educational systems are established to achieve the goals that the founders of it want. International documents of human rights also determine goals for the human rights education. For example, at the conference of human rights education held in Vienna in 1987, some of the goals of the human rights education were introduced as follows:

1. The encouragement of behaviours focusing on compatibility with the others,
2. The development of respect, unity, knowledge and information about human rights,
3. The increase of ways and devices for bringing human rights into social and political reality,

Observing basic rights is the prerequisite of democracy, coordination, and social security. However, for the improvement of human rights conditions, informing people of these rights is a necessity so that people can behave in a way that human rights are guaranteed and observed and defended. Human rights education has some components which link education to action. When these components are used together, the results will be more effective. There are two important points to be considered regarding the components of human rights education. First, these components can offer devices which teachers can use reasonably and logically to achieve the goals of human rights education. Second, these components are not independent. The components of human rights education among others include thoughts (what knowledge and information should the learners understand and what new abilities should the learners gain?) and sentiments (how can the reinforcement of commitment and partnership among the learners be fostered and what values and beliefs are important?). Human rights should be respected in communication and cultural exchange. Equipping learners with the knowledge of human rights helps them to know what skills they will have after their educational period. It will help the learners to acquire the skills which they need to defend their rights and others' rights. Human rights education can address many skills such as helping learners how to react, when confronting human rights violation and how to organize and teach others about human rights. Also, the skills which are taught should be consistent and relevant to the conditions and the needs of the learners.

Undoubtedly, the outcomes of human rights education in a context like Iran are more important than the human rights education itself (Navab Daneshmand 2007). There should be opportunities for students to put in action their acquired skills and educations. These opportunities will make their learning meaningful.

1.2. Types of human rights education

Generally, human rights education can be presented in both formal and informal educational systems. In the formal education systems, human rights education is carried out in schools and universities. In informal education systems, human rights are taught to different kinds and groups of people who are not in schools through NGOs, the media and so on. The selection of teaching method is one of the important points in the process of human rights education. Actually, the teacher should choose a suitable method for teaching rights which is definitely context-specific. Teaching methods which can fit for the human rights education include lecturing, brainstorming, and using new tools such as cell phones and blogs. There are also some research methods which will lend themselves to human rights education such as case studies and field projects.

Despite comprehensive attempts on human rights education, there are a lot of concerns about it in Iran. As the global community challenges nations for violations from time to time, countries are now changing and reforming their educational systems to meet the needs of the peoples of the twenty-first century. These challenges are no longer specific to one country. They are international issues. World-wide curriculum development organizations around the world are now reconsidering their aims in these lights. In the introductions of many charters, it is mentioned that now it's time for the worldwide community to give confidence to people about their rights. Education plays an effective role in improving peace and in perceiving human rights worldwide. Therefore, all curricula and teachings of the educational systems should pave the way for children, the young and adults to improve their confidence and social knowledge and to develop the ability to take part in all levels of their community in national and worldwide arenas.

There is not any clear-cut course specifically designed for human rights education in the Iranian secondary education system. Based on the purposes and the operational variables of this study, a set of concepts were chosen from human rights education literature and were analyzed with the assistance of scholars from Beheshti and Tehran universities who were specialized in human rights education. These were then used for the development of the questionnaire used in the present study.

Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3 show the framework used for the identification of human rights education concepts and elements in the domains of knowledge, skill and attitude.

Table 1: Concepts and elements of human right in the domain of knowledge

Awareness of the individual responsibilities
Awareness of the contrast between individual liberties and social control
Familiarity with the relations of the human being and the environment
Awareness of the social justice and equal opportunities
Awareness of the basic liberties
Awareness of the life standards
Familiarity with the concept of change through the changes in the individuals, the environment and the society
Awareness of the social rules and relations to establish order and take responsibility

Table 2: Concepts and elements of human right in the domain of attitude

Respect to all forms of life and existence
Development of the law respecting spirit
Development of the disagreeing attitude against the fight and violence
Aquisition of the data collection spirit for data analysis
Development of the spirit of fighting against the oppression and defending their rights
Development of the spirit of cooperation, participation and integrity
Acceptance of and disagreement with the discriminatory inequalities in the communities and the nations
Development of the spirit of Taking criticism from the individuals

Table 3: Concepts and elements of the human right in the domain of skill

The ability of respecting and understanding each other's rights
The ability of speaking and mutual understanding
The ability of accepting the varieties in the society and respecting them.
Taking a responsibility Individually and socially
The ability to understand the environment and to deal with it
The ability and skill to solve disagreements peacefully without violence and conflict
The ability to observe the social ethics and accepted principles
The ability to feel sympathy with the others in a group, local society and international level

2. Method

In this study, a descriptive method was used to survey the amount of attention paid to the human rights education in the Iranian secondary school curriculum based on the viewpoint of the secondary school teachers and specialists in Kashan, and the curriculum experts in Tehran. According to the education department of kashan, 420 teachers are employed in the secondary schools from among which 200 teachers were chosen by simple random sampling. 27 experts were chosen by simple random sampling and also 15 curriculum experts in the curriculum planning office of the research organizations were chosen through random sampling. They all answered the questionnaire. To establish the reliability of the questionnaire, the answers were analyzed with SPSS. The reliability of the teachers' responses to the questionnaire was .89; for the specialists, it was .95 and for the experts it was .94. To analyze the results, descriptive and inferential statistics were used. The questionnaire had two different scales: the first scale consisting of 30 items to measure the elements of human rights education in the three domain of knowledge, skill and attitude and the second scale consisting of 15 items to measure the amount of attention paid to these elements in the secondary education curriculum in the planning, administrating and evaluating of the curriculum. Also to score the items, Likert scale was used.

3. Results

The results of the analyses showed that teachers, specialists and experts identified items that need to be included in human rights education in Iran. All the participants in the study agreed with using these elements in the curriculum of schools. Most of the participants in this study agreed with the lack of attention to human rights education in the present curriculum structure in the society. They also strongly agreed that the amount of attention paid to the human rights education in the secondary education curriculum was low and unfavourable. For the identification of human rights education concepts in the secondary education, according to the results of t-test, the teachers, the experts and the specialist's attitudes were reported in the summaries of the following related tables in the three different domains; In the domain of knowledge, the mean score was 3.43 for teachers, 3.47 for the specialist and 3.36 for the experts. In the domain skill the mean score was 3.36 for the teachers, 3.66 for the specialist and 3.60 for the experts. In the domain of attitude the mean score was 3.59 for the teachers, 3.46 for the specialist and 3.40 for the experts. According to the table 1., the comparison of the means show that they are in a favorable level, because these means are higher than the theoretical means and are meaningful with the reliability of 99 percent. These means show the positive attitudes of the participants to the human rights education in the small scales.

*Investigation of the amount of attentions paid to the human rights education in the secondary education curriculum.

Table 4: Questions regarding the amount of attention paid to the human rights education in the small scale design

Is the human rights education considered in determining of the present curriculum objectives.?
Is the human rights education considered in designing of the secondary education curriculum?.
Is the human rights education considered in organizing of the curriculum contents?
Is the human rights education considered in designing of the education tools?

Statistical results are indicative of the fact that the majority of the research participants (85 percent of the experts), with a mean of 1.70 agreed that the amount of attention paid to these elements was low and unfavourable in the designing step of the secondary education curriculum.

Table 5: Questions regarding the amount of attention paid to the human rights education in the small scale administration

Are the applied (current)teaching methods in the schools appropriate and compatible with the human rights education?
Do the teachers' relations with the students provide the required opportunities for the human rights education?
Are the teachers and the other staff committed to practically enforce the human rights education?
Are the methods of grouping compatible with the human rights education?
Is there the appropriate milieu and atmosphere for the human rights education?
Do the current rules and regulations in the schools provide an appropriate setting for the human rights? education?
Are the students provided with the appropriate opportunities to observe the human rights education.

Statistical results are indicative of this issue that the majority of the research participants (71.20 percent of teachers) with a mean of 2.02 agreed that the amount of attention paid was low and unfavourable in the administrating step of the secondary education curriculum.

Table 6 Questions regarding the amount of attention paid to the human rights education in the small scale evaluation.
of the evaluation of the students, Are the values and features of human rights education and nurturing considered?

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Are the effective evaluation methods used to pay more attentions to the knowledge, skill and attitude among the students?
 Are the students evaluated according to the higher level of learning such as: analysis, compound, evaluation and so on?

Statistical results are indicative of this issue that the majority of the research participants (84.24 percent of teachers), with the mean of 1.83 agreed that the amount of attention paid is low and unfavourable in the evaluation step of the secondary education curriculum.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Human rights are undeniable rights for mankind and must be considered as the part of the basic education for all strata of people especially the young. The goal is to help individuals to identify the fundamental values of life and to acquire the skills to defend these values. The goals of human rights education include respecting human rights and basic liberties through increasing individuals' knowledge in this aspect, developing human personality, increasing relations between scientific activities and research activities in the field of human rights, maintaining national identity, and teaching students their rights as citizens. The findings of the present survey, which present the concepts of the human rights education in the three domains of knowledge, skill and attitude in the viewpoint of the teachers, specialists and experts, indicate that the identified elements have different values but have all been neglected in one way or another in the system addressed in the study. The analysis of these values one by one takes a lot of time and effort; however, generally statistical results are indicative of the positive attitudes of the participants to the identified concepts. This can pave the way for an effective national as well as international development in terms of human rights issues. Supplementary findings indicate that in the viewpoint of the experts the amount of attention paid to the human rights education is low in devising the curriculum of the secondary education. Also, in the viewpoint of the teachers the amount of attention paid to these concepts are low in the administration and evaluation steps. This study attempts to make us aware of the gap felt in the curriculum. It is hoped that this study can be a trigger for steps forward.

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